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ABSTRACT

In partnership with the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD) on the Navajo Reservation in northeastern Arizona, Northern Arizona University developed the Rural Special Education Project (RSEP) as a field-based training program for special education teachers. In the past 3 years, 22 Anglo American and 26 Navajo students have graduated from RSEP. In an assessment of the impact of RSEP, 20 individuals, including KUSD teachers and administrators, Kayenta community members, and former RSEP participants were interviewed. An overwhelming majority indicated that the program had a positive impact on the school and the community. Positive effects included continuing education for Navajo teacher aides, strong teacher candidates for employment, and increased classroom help for students. Perceived program strengths included practical classroom experience and public speaking experience, while perceived weaknesses involved program demands and frequent travel. Major concerns about the RSEP program were related to funding needs and student recruitment. With regard to the impact of RSEP on children, most respondents agreed that increased student assistance was most significant. RSEP changes in the past 4 years include increased enrollment and changes attributable to the change in instructors. Former RSEP participants indicated that RSEP had affected their career or life by inspiring them to continue their education. (TD)

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IMPACT OF A RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATION FIELD-BASED PROGRAM ON THE KAYENTA SCHOOL SYSTEM AND COMMUNITY

Introduction

The Rural Special Education Project (RSEP) was founded in the fall of 1992 with the purpose of educating special education teachers. In partnership with the Kayenta Unified School District (KUSD), Northern Arizona University (NAU) professors started the RSEP program as a field-based special education training program. RSEP is funded by a grant and is now in its fourth year.

In the past three years, 48 students have graduated from the RSEP program. This figure consisted of 22 Anglo-Saxon Americans and 26 Navajo Native Americans. Currently enrolled are six Anglo-Saxon students, and nine Navajo students. All participants of the RSEP program live in or around Kayenta.

Kayenta is located on the Navajo reservation in Northeastern Arizona, 20 miles from the Utah border. The Navajo Nation is roughly the size of West Virginia, constituting the largest reservation territory in the United States. Despite the size of the Navajo Nation, Kayenta continues to be a small community with approximately 6,000 inhabitants. The population of Kayenta is predominantly Navajo.

Established Need

There is an acute and chronic shortage of personnel qualified to provide special education services to Native American students with disabilities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 1993), Native Americans may comprise a disproportionate percentage of the special education population. Most Native Americans live in remote or rural areas, whether on or off the reservation. Due to the majority of Native Americans living in rural and remote areas, provisions for sufficient support services for this population is difficult (Alliance, 1994).

In addition, a noted lack of Native American special educators contributes to the problem of preparation, recruitment, and retention of teachers for rural and reservation areas. Personnel from school systems located in rural and remote areas find it difficult to recruit and retain qualified special educators. Only 9% of Native American adults have completed four years of college, compared to 20% of the total population (O'Brien, 1992).

Purpose

The purpose of the presented information is to provide an assessment of the impact of RSEP on the Kayenta school system and the community. An analysis of the long-term effects of the RSEP program will be provided as well as the perceived strengths, needs and concerns of the program.

Method

The primary method of data collection consisted of results analyzed from informal surveys and

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interviews. The survey and interview questions were generated by NAU students enrolled in the RSEP program. A total of 20 individuals were surveyed. The targeted group consisted of KUSD teachers and administrators, as well as Kayenta community members and former participants of the RSEP. Listed below are the six questions which were asked in the survey and interview.

Interview Questions

1. Has RSEP had an impact on the school and the community? If so, how?
2. What are some perceived weaknesses and strengths of the RSEP program?
3. What are some perceived needs and concerns of the RSEP program?
4. What, if any, has been the impact of RSEP on children?
5. How has RSEP changed or evolved in the past four years?
6. Former participants of the RSEP program were asked, How has RSEP effected your career and/or your life?

The surveys and interviews were analyzed and interpreted by NAU students. RSEP students not only generated, distributed, and gathered the questionnaires, but analyzed and interpreted the findings. After the 20 surveys were returned, one researcher targeted the administrators to be interviewed. Administrators surveyed were asked to participate in one 20-minute interview. Interview questions consisted of the identical questions asked on the survey. The purpose of the interview was to expand on details or facts given in the survey and to provide a means of confirming the information obtained through the surveys.

Results

In response to question one: Has RSEP had an impact on the school and the community? An overwhelming majority indicated that the program had a positive impact on the school and the community.

- One administrator who has been with KUSD for four years claimed that RSEP has "provided [Navajo] aides with a means of continuing their education." Also noted by this administrator was the fact that RSEP provides "an internship experience which promotes understanding of the culture and the classroom responsibility of teachers."
- Another administrator who has been with the district for 24 years claimed that RSEP provided "strong teacher candidates for employment" as well as an "increased school resource base."
- Overall, teachers commented upon increased help for students in the classroom and the continuing education for local students.
- One former participant related an increased "participation in class and community activities."
- Additionally, one community member stated that "opportunities for more Navajo teachers on-site." was a major impact.

In response to question two: What are some perceived weaknesses and strengths of the RSEP program? Overall, response indicated a variety of opinions on the subject.

- The administration felt that weaknesses included the demands of the program and frequent travel that removed Navajo aides from the classroom. The perceived strengths included public speaking experience and practical classroom experience rather than only theoretical foundations.

- One teacher also targeted frequent "long distance workshops" as a perceived weakness. Perceived strengths included an increase in courses offered throughout the reservation as a consequence of the RSEP program.
- A 1994-1995 RSEP participant noted that the program took time away from family. Perceived strengths included experience with public presentations and the provision of "university level education to those who couldn't go get it."
- Community members claimed RSEP filled the need for more educators, although this year showed a decline in participants enrolled in the program.

In response to question three: What are some perceived needs and concerns of the RSEP program? General feedback was with regards to the future of the program.

- Administrators felt that recruitment into the program is a concern as well as the efficiency of the RSEP application process.
- Teachers noted a concern with funding and a need for teacher certification on the reservation.
- A former RSEP participant simply noted 'money' as a need as well as a demand for increased recruitment.
- One community member also noted the need for increased advertising leading to an increase in enrollment into the RSEP program.

In response to question four: What, if any, has been the impact of RSEP on children? The majority of respondents agreed that increased student assistance has been the most significant impactful consequence of the RSEP program.

- One administrator stated "RSEP has provided additional classroom support to students. Students have benefited from one on one or small group support in reading, writing, and math. Special needs students have also received extra attention in the regular class setting."
- Teachers also generally noted the main impact to be extra attention students receive through one-on-one assistance.
- A former RSEP participant stated that in addition to children receiving additional assistance, "RSEP brought new views and visions to the principles of education. They gave us new ways of thinking and doing things."
- Community members commented on the additional assistance support facilitators received, directly adding to the increased students attention. One member stated, "Sometimes the RSEP students see the child before the support staff, and are very in tune with the kids, and are very good at communicating their feelings."

In response to question five: How has RSEP changed or evolved in the past four years? Respondents seemed to credit the change in the nature of the program to the change in instructors.

- One administrator remarked that although the "program has retained its basic elements, each year it reflects the personality of the on-site professor."

- Teachers noted the increase in enrollment as well as a desire for more consistency with the instructor. One teacher stated, "I have found that the project manager has changed [frequently]... This has been unfortunate."
- Each former participant noted change to some extent. Although the courses taught are the same, the manner in which they are taught vary with the professor. One participant stated, "RSEP professors need to be more involved in the student's classroom and with cooperating teachers."

In response to question six: How has RSEP effected your career and/or your life? This question was directed exclusively toward former RSEP participants.

- One student responded, "RSEP gave me more in-depth ideas and strategies in teaching. I feel more confident in what I am doing on the job because I have more focus and see that there are many ways to do things."
- Another former RSEP student responded, "... I am close to finishing [my degree])."
- Still another former RSEP student responded, "RSEP has effected my career very much...I am pursuing further education."

Implications for the future

The continued success of the RSEP will require the further implementation of the following key components, as well as the maintained practice of the critical factors listed. While the RSEP has strived to accomplish the indicators below, continued improvement in these areas is essential.

- Increased enrollment in RSEP
- Increased funding for RSEP
- Consistency of RSEP project managers
- Limited travel requirements (i.e., conferences, field trips)
- Increased certification for rural or remote residents
- Higher retention rate for special education teachers on the reservation
- Increased cultural exchange between Native Americans and NAU students
- Increased commitment to filling the need for Native American special education teachers
- Increased commitment to practical experiences which augments theoretical foundations
- Individual and small group attention to students

Conclusion

The RSEP continues to provide future special educators with practical experience and coursework while in Kayenta. The project enables Navajo students to live and work within the community while achieving their special education certification. Increasing the number of Navajo special educators directly influences the quality of support services being offered in rural, remote, or reservation areas. Training of Navajo special educators within their own community will increase recruiting and retention of this drastically needed profession. Presently eight Navajo special educators have graduated from the RSEP program and NAU. All have returned to the Navajo Nation. Nineteen Navajo students have graduated from the RSEP program and are continuing their education either on campus or through Interactive Instructional Television (IITV) courses from their home-sites.

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